



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

SYLLABUS DEL CORSO

Eventi Critici e Apprendimento Organizzativo

2627-1-F8805N004

Learning objectives

The course introduces students to a systemic and organizational perspective on critical events, including accidents, disasters, and organizational failures, with particular attention to the processes through which organizations interpret events, attribute responsibility, and construct explanations of their crises.

Starting from the question How do organizations explain, interpret, and assign responsibility after a critical event?, the course examines the phenomenon of organizational scapegoating as a recurrent mechanism for managing uncertainty, blame, and reputation, highlighting its implications for organizational learning and safety governance. Particular attention is devoted to the contrast between blame culture and just culture, emphasizing how different approaches to responsibility attribution affect organizations' ability to learn from errors, identify systemic vulnerabilities, and develop effective prevention practices.

The course aims to provide students with the conceptual and methodological tools needed to understand how decisions, organizational practices, latent factors, and institutional arrangements contribute to the production of critical events, moving beyond reductionist interpretations based solely on human error or technological failure.

Through the analysis of empirical cases, practical exercises, and guided discussions, students will be introduced to the main models for analyzing critical events and organizational learning processes. The course is designed to foster independent judgment, critical reasoning, and analytical skills that can be applied to the study of complex organizational settings.

Expected Learning Outcomes

Knowledge and Understanding

By the end of the course, students will have acquired an advanced understanding of:

- the main theoretical approaches to the analysis of critical events, accidents, and disasters as organizational and social processes;
- the dynamics of blame attribution and the mechanisms through which organizational scapegoats are constructed in the aftermath of critical events;
- the role of human factors, decision-making processes, organizational culture, and latent conditions in the production and prevention of critical events;
- the fundamental concepts of organizational safety, including weak signals, near misses, accident precursors,

safety culture, and organizational learning.

Applying Knowledge and Understanding

Students will be able to:

- analyze critical events by reconstructing their main causal chains and identifying organizational vulnerabilities and failure mechanisms;
- apply organizational analysis models and concepts to interpret accidents, disasters, and organizational failures;
- distinguish between individual blame attribution and systemic responsibility, recognizing the dynamics underlying organizational scapegoating;
- critically assess the role of prevention practices, reporting systems, and organizational safety mechanisms.

Making Judgements

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- formulate independent judgments regarding organizational and institutional responsibilities in cases of critical events;
- critically evaluate risk management and safety strategies, practices, and organizational arrangements;
- recognize the limitations of explanations based solely on individual error and develop systemic and organizational interpretations of critical events.

Communication Skills

Students will be able to:

- communicate analyses of critical events clearly and rigorously, using appropriate and conceptually grounded terminology;
- discuss and defend alternative interpretations of complex cases with both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- present organizational reconstructions of accidents and disasters, both orally and in writing, supported by empirical evidence and theoretical arguments.

Learning Skills

By the end of the course, students will have developed:

- the ability to identify, understand, and critically engage with the scientific literature on critical events, safety, and organizational learning;
- the ability to integrate different sources of evidence in the analysis of empirical cases;
- a reflective approach to organizational learning processes following critical events;
- the ability to transfer concepts and analytical tools to different organizational contexts.

Contents

The course introduces the basic conceptual tools for the analysis of critical events, blame attribution processes, and organizational learning. Through a comparison between blame culture and just culture, students will develop an organizational and systemic perspective on safety, aimed at understanding the underlying causes of critical events and moving beyond explanations based solely on individual error.

Detailed program

The course is structured into three integrated parts.

The first part introduces the key concepts of the organizational analysis of critical events, error management, and post-event learning from a just culture perspective. Particular attention is devoted to responsibility attribution processes and the construction of organizational scapegoats, highlighting their implications for safety and organizational learning. Through the comparison between blame culture and just culture, students acquire conceptual tools to understand how organizations interpret and manage errors, accidents, and failures.

The second part focuses on the organizational analysis of critical events. Students are introduced to interpretive models that enable them to reconstruct causal sequences and identify organizational vulnerabilities, latent

conditions, and institutional factors contributing to the production of risk. The analysis proceeds retrospectively from the manifest event to the organizational and environmental conditions that made its occurrence possible, moving beyond reductionist explanations based exclusively on human error or technological failure.

The third part of the course is devoted to the application of concepts and analytical models to empirical cases. Cases are not treated as simple illustrative examples but as learning tools through which students develop a shared conceptual vocabulary (active failures, latent conditions, weak signals, near misses, accident precursors, and accident sequences) and strengthen their analytical skills. In the final phase of the course, students work in groups to conduct independent analyses of specific critical events and organizational failures. Illustrative cases include the Challenger and Columbia space shuttle disasters, aviation accidents, the September 11 terrorist attacks, large-scale wildfires, and major industrial explosions.

Prerequisites

No prior knowledge is required.

Teaching methods

The course combines different teaching formats, including:

- Lectures;
- Guided discussion of empirical cases;
- Analysis of documentary and journalistic materials;
- Viewing and discussion of audiovisual materials;
- Guest lectures and seminars.

The course is designed to promote active student participation. Teaching activities will consist approximately of:

- 40% lecture-based teaching;
- 60% interactive learning activities (case analyses, group work, exercises, and case-study presentations).

All classes will be held in person.

Assessment methods

Both attending and non-attending students will be assessed through a written examination consisting of open-ended questions based on the materials listed under “Reading List”. No mid-term examinations are scheduled. The assessment is intended to evaluate students’ understanding of the course contents and their ability to critically reflect on key issues addressed during the course.

Evaluation criteria include:

- knowledge and understanding of the main theoretical concepts;
- ability to apply these concepts to the analysis of critical events;
- ability to develop critical and well-argued interpretations.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Attending and non-attending students

- Catino, M. (2022). Trovare il colpevole. La costruzione del capro espiatorio nelle organizzazioni. Bologna: il Mulino (full text).

Sustainable Development Goals

INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
